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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000089

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/SINGH
STATE FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/FO:ATACHCO

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TAGS: PGOV PREL LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: ARMENIAN CATHOLICOS SEES LEBANON'S
POLITICAL SITUATION AT THE CROSSROADS

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Section 1.4 (d)
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Summary

¶1. (C) The Patriarch of the Armenian Church in Lebanon, Catholicos Aram I, believes that Lebanon's political situation has reached a "crossroads" at which conflict between government and opposition cannot continue. The priority of all Lebanese must be the well-being of Lebanon, not the promotion of their own confessional groups. To achieve this goal of national focus, a new President must be elected, followed by a new political agreement, a "Taif II." He felt that such an agreement would break the current deadlock and bring political consensus. Also, a new agreement would provide the means for an outside "mediator," like Russia, to help influence Iran and Syria and gain their cooperation on limiting support for Hizballah. Also, Aram commented that it was unlikely that Michel Aoun had "transformed" his image enough to become a viable candidate for the presidency. He concluded by stressing that the pro-opposition position of the Armenian Tashnak party in Lebanon should never be mistaken to represent the whole Armenian community, and that the majority in the Armenian community are pro-government. End Summary.

POLITICAL BREAKTHROUGH REQUIRED,
NO SHORT-TERM FIX

¶2. (C) The Ambassador and Poloff called on Aram I Kichichian, the Armenian Catholics of Cilicia, on January 11. The Catholicos stated that the political situation in Lebanon had become "crazy," shaped by the concept of "us versus them." No one was putting the nation's well-being first and in the "center of the table." The politicians, parliament, and opposition groups were all thinking about their own self-interests, rather than advocating for Lebanon as a nation. He pessimistically indicated to the Ambassador that if a political breakthrough is not achieved soon, the situation would lead to a political "collapse" resulting in a permanent Sunni-Shia split leading to sectarian violence.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador noted that Lebanon had faced tough political times in the past, throughout the 1975-1990 civil war for example, and asked in what ways the present situation is worse. Aram explained that, unlike in the last 40 years,

a short-term "shortsighted" fix will not work this time around. There is a growing political gap between Sunni and Shia, which if not bridged, will eventually lead to more radical elements in both camps gaining control. Aram stated that one can see this process happening not just in Lebanon, but throughout the region in Iraq and Syria. He lamented that this type of Sunni-Shia split can only lead to a violent sectarian outcome for Lebanon.

LAHOUD IS A NON-FACTOR

¶4. (C) The Catholicos reiterated his disapproval of President Emile Lahoud (despite the President's links to the Armenian community through his Armenian mother and Armenian wife). The President had done nothing to ease tensions in the country and had served as an impediment to improving the political climate. He joked to the Ambassador that the President's actions and behavior were "not worth our time" to talk about and Lahoud had insufficient authority to make a real difference. While agreeing with the Catholicos's negative portrayal of President Lahoud's performance, the Ambassador countered that the President has proven that he retains sufficient authority to cause problems, such as in his unwillingness to approve a by-election in Metn for the parliament seat left vacant by Pierre Gemayel's assassination. The Catholicos simply responded that soon there would be a new President and Lahoud will be out of the political scene.

SPECIAL TRIBUNAL SHOULD BE "DE-POLITICIZED"

¶5. (C) The Patriarch believed that the Special Tribunal to
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try suspects for the Rafiq Hariri assassination was being used by both government and opposition to further their own political agendas and that "no one is the winner." He emphasized that it was wrong for the March 14 supporters to make the Tribunal part of their own political platform. The Tribunal belongs to all of Lebanon and not to any specific political group. It should be "de-politicized" and removed from the heated political scene. It must be impartial and not be effected by "outside" political groups. The Ambassador indicated that while the Tribunal should be independent, it was the opposition (President Lahoud, Speaker Nabih Berri and Hizballah) who were impeding and politicizing the tribunal, not March 14.

POLITICAL SOLUTION: "TAIF II"

¶6. (C) The Catholicos emphasized that what was needed to break the political deadlock was a new political agreement, a "Taif II." He felt that the political problems facing Lebanon were too great simply to look to a national dialogue for a solution. A new political consensus had to be achieved to circumvent the current paralysis. He indicated the first step in this process would be to elect a new President. After the election, a process to organize a Taif II agreement would begin.

¶7. (C) The Ambassador asked why Lebanon should make a new agreement, when the reforms of the original Taif Agreement had not been completed? Aram responded that Taif only dealt with the internal issues of Lebanon. In formulating Taif II, the process would include a regional perspective which could bring in outside parties, like Russia, who could play a mediating role with Iran and Syria. Russia could use its influence to secure the cooperation of both countries to minimize their support for Hizballah.

IRAN IS KEY TO INFLUENCING
HIZBALLAH

¶ 8. (C) The Catholicos seemed to contradict his earlier statements, advocating Lebanese self-determination in finding its own political solution, when he confided to the Ambassador that a solution to the current political standoff could not be reached by the Lebanese themselves. He stated that achieving political peace in Lebanon is not just an internal problem. He believed that Iran held the true keys to peace in Lebanon. Disarming Hizballah is essential to any peaceful outcome in Lebanon. To pressure Hizballah, you need to bring Iran on board to cut the flow of funding and arms to its militants.

¶ 9. (C) Aram related a recent conversation with the Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon, Mohammad Reza Sheibani, in which he inquired whether Iran would be willing to encourage Hizballah to be more cooperative in the political process in Lebanon. The Iranian Ambassador was "surprised" by the request, but seemed to indicate that Iran might be willing to consider such a role. (Note: Aram was somewhat vague on explaining Sheibani's response and seemed unconvinced himself. End Note.) Syria, in Aram's opinion, had become more marginalized in Lebanon and less able to influence events. Syria is more dependent on Iran, and in its weakened position, is less likely to act independently in the region.

AOUN NOT READY TO BE PRESIDENT

¶ 10. (C) The Catholicos volunteered his impression of Michel Aoun. It seemed that Aoun had not yet made the necessary political "transformation" to become the leading Christian candidate for the presidency. Aoun lacks the true qualities of leadership that could build a real political consensus, and his personal style had become too arrogant to unite the many different groups in the country. He had split the Christian community by aligning himself with Hizballah. The lack of positive developments from the demonstrations had resulted in waning support for his presidential ambitions. Aram hoped a more "inclusive" candidate could be found to help lead the country out of its current political crisis.

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THE ARMENIAN COMMUNITY IS MORE
THAN JUST THE TASHNAQ PARTY

¶ 11. (C) In concluding the meeting, the Catholicos stressed that while the Armenian Tashnaq party in Lebanon supported the opposition and its actions (albeit in a moderate, fence-sitting fashion), the majority of the Armenian community did not support the "opposition" position against the government. The policies of the Tashnaq Party should never be mistaken to represent the whole Armenian community. Aram seemed concerned that Tashnaq's support for the opposition movement had indirectly linked the Armenian community in Lebanon, especially Orthodox Armenians, with supporting Hizballah and its actions. He stated that, "while it is true that 90 percent of the Tashnaq party is made up of Orthodox Armenians, it represents less than half of the Orthodox community as a whole." Therefore, Tashnaq views should not be seen as the sole representation of orthodox Armenians. Aram made it clear that the Tashnaq Party needed to be mindful of how it projected itself in the current tense political situation and to avoid being connected with Hizballah.

FELTMAN